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ABSTRACT

This questionnaire study surveyed the attitudes of public school administrators regarding several topics associated with teacher preparation programs. These foci included: (1) the content of the letter of reference written for student teachers and interns by cooperating teachers (in this study, cooperating teachers are those practicing teachers who work with student teachers and interns in their own classrooms), (2) suggestions by administrators for improving the opportunity for employing inexperienced teacher candidates, (3) interview questions often asked by administrators, and (4) the employability of elementary interns as opposed to student teachers. These topics were analyzed with data collected by means of a survey of a sample of Wisconsin public school administrators. (Author)

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SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS EVALUATE THE LETTER OF REFERENCE AND SELECTED RECRUITMENT PRACTICES

by Ronald Mortaloni

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INTRODUCTION

This questionnaire study surveyed the attitudes of public school administrators regarding several topics associated with teacher preparation programs. These focii included: (1) the content of the letter of reference written for student teachers and interns by cooperating teachers (in this study, cooperating teachers are those practicing teachers who work with student teachers and interns in their own classrooms), (2) suggestions by administrators for improving the opportunity for employing inexperienced teacher candidates, (3) interview questions often asked by administrators and (4) the employability of elementary interns as opposed to student teachers from the viewpoint of administrators.

These topics were analyzed with data collected by means of a survey of a sample of Wisconsin public school administrators.

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PROCEDURE

The works of (1) Gilbert (1966); (2) Lesher and Wade (1972); (3) May and Doerge (1972); (4) Rhodes and Peckham (1960); and (5) Wilkinson (1963), were instrumental in the process of developing a questionnaire that was distributed to Wisconsin public school staff members who were

responsible for hiring inexperienced elementary school teacher candidates. According to Elementary and Secondary Education - Education Directory 1972 - 1973 Public School Systems (1973), staff members from 429 school districts in Wisconsin qualified to be included in this population.

A stratified random sampling technique was used to isolate the sample of 157 staff personnel. Within the sample, seven categories determined according to school district enrollment, were established. Within each category the appropriate number of school personnel was selected through the use of a table of random numbers.

The initial distribution of the questionnaire took place on April 15, 1974. Approximately two weeks later, a follow-up letter and questionnaire were sent to those participants who, as yet, had not responded. As a result of both solicitations, 128 questionnaires were returned and used in the study. This represents a return of 82%.

RESULTS OF COMPONENT I (Sections A, B, and C)

All 63 items in this part of the questionnaire required the respondent to rate the value of specific topics associated with the student teaching/ internship experience. The following options were included in the rating scale - Not Important; Slightly Important; Important; Very Important; and Essential. In addition, a column titled "Not Used" was also employed in the event the issue being evaluated was not used by the respondent. The categories in the scale were defined and the participants were asked to rate the importance of each item as it applied in the recruitment process utilized in their school district. Numerical values were assigned to all

but the "Not Used" category where a tally was recorded. Data processing services were then employed to establish category frequencies and a mean score for individual items. The mean scores for all questions were ranked according to the procedure shown in Tables I, II, and III.

The items in Section A of the questionnaire dealt with information often included in the pre-service teacher's placement file. Table I shows that the 4 highest ranking items in this section were associated with the student teaching/internship experience. These items with their respective mean scores were: letters of reference from the student teaching or internship cooperating teacher (4.54); letters of reference from the college or university student teacher/internship supervisor (4.13); letters of reference from the building principal where the candidate was involved in the student teaching/internship experience (3.72); the candidate's grade in the student teaching/internship experience (3.46). The results point out the importance attached to the practicum experience of pre-service preparation by these school administrators at least when compared with the items included in Section A.

The top ranking item in this section, by a considerable margin, was the letter of reference written by the cooperating teacher. While this is no surprise, it infers that the cooperating teachers should be aware of the implications of the letter of reference, be familiar with the audience for which the letter is being written and be able to implement certain basic skills involved in the task of writing the letter, particularly if it is a written narrative as opposed to a checklist type. This situation

dictates that colleges and universities have a responsibility for providing in-service activities for cooperating teachers that would include a thorough and comprehensive analysis of various aspects of the letter of reference.

TABLE I

Results of Section A:
Rank Order of Selected Data Included in the Inexperienced Elementary School Teacher Candidate's Placement File

Rank	Mean Score*	(Tally) Not used in the Recruitment Process (Total possible N of 128)	
1	4.54	0	Letters of reference from the student teaching or internship cooperating teacher. (Cooperating teacher is the practicing teacher who works with student teachers and interns in his/her own classroom).
2	4.13	0	Letters of reference from the college or university student teacher/internship supervisor.
3	3.72	0	Letters of reference from the building principal where the candidate was involved in the student teaching/internship experience.
4	3.46	2	The candidate's grade in the student teaching/internship experience.
5	3.04	0	Letters of reference from college or university faculty.
6	2.98	2	The candidate's overall grade point average.
7	2.37	1	Letters of reference from people other than educators.

*Maximum mean score possible is 5.00

Section B of the questionnaire solicited responses on 23 specific personal characteristics that could be included in the letter of reference composed by the cooperating teacher. As shown in Table II, the 5 highest ranking personal characteristics evaluated in Section B were the student teacher/intern's: enthusiasm (4.48); ability to benefit from constructive advice from supervisors (4.45); dependability (4.44); cooperative attitude (4.32); and desire to work hard (4.29).

The five attributes that were considered least important in this section were the student teacher/intern's: physical disabilities (2.52); age (2.43); cultural background (2.41); marital status (1.75); and religious affiliation (1.24).

The "Not Used" option was selected an appreciable number of times (more than 3) for several items among the personal characteristics. These attributes with their respective frequencies were the student teacher/intern's: religious affiliation (35); marital status (13); attitude toward minority groups (13); physical disabilities (7); and cultural background (6). All five of the items that received a relatively high number of the "Not Used" option were also included among the six attributes that ranked lowest in this category. In addition to being considered of lesser importance by those who used these characteristics, they were also not used by many public school staff members.

TABLE II

Results of Section B:
Rank Order of Personal Characteristics
Based on Evaluations by Administrators

Rank	Mean Score*	(Tally) Not Used in the Recruitment Process (Total Possible N of 128)	The Student Teacher/Intern's:
1	4.48	0	Enthusiasm
2	4.45	0	Ability to benefit from constructive advice from supervisors.
3	4.44	0	Dependability
4	4.32	0	Cooperative attitude
5	4.29	0	Desire to work hard
6	4.27	0	Ability to get along with other teachers.
7	4.06	0	Maturity
8	3.81	1	Courteousness
9.5	3.66	0	Leadership qualities
9.5	3.66	0	Voice and speech
11	3.62	1	Sense of humor
12	3.60	2	Mental stamina
13	3.58	0	Neatness, dress and grooming
14	3.57	0	Health
15	3.40	1	Physical stamina
16	3.25	0	General intelligence
17	2.98	3	Community participation
18	2.66	13	Attitude toward minority groups

TABLE II Continued

Rank	Mean Score*	(Tally) Not Used in the Recruitment Process	The Student Teacher/Intern's:
19	2.52	7	Physical disabilities
20	2.43	3	Age
21	2.41	6	Cultural background
22	1.76	13	Marital status
23	1.24	35	Religious affiliation

*Maximum mean score possible is 5.00.

Section C of the questionnaire was designed to evaluate professional characteristics that could be included in the written narrative for student teachers and interns. As indicated in Table III, the five characteristics that ranked highest in this section included the student teacher/intern's: understanding of children and their basic needs (4.50); ability to maintain classroom control (4.49); provision for individual differences (4.35); personal and interpersonal relationships with children (4.27); and ability to plan well in advance for lessons (4.16).

The last 5 professional characteristics in terms of rank order were the student teacher/intern's: ability to involve children in lesson planning and evaluation (3.42); lesson summaries and conclusions (3.40); career goals (3.27); use of the chalkboard (2.97); and handwriting skill (2.78).

The rank order of items provided in Sections B and C will not reveal those personal and professional attributes that should be included in a letter of reference. However, these data should furnish those who are responsible for writing evaluative statements with at least some priorities

as seen by those individuals who are responsible for hiring inexperienced elementary school teacher candidates, namely public school administrators.

TABLE III

Results of Section C:
Rank Order of Professional Characteristics
Based on Evaluations by Administrators

Rank	Mean Score*	(Tally) Not Used in the Recruitment Process (Total possible N of 128)	The Student Teacher/ Intern's:
1	4.50	0	Understanding of children and their basic needs
2	4.49	0	Ability to maintain classroom control
3	4.35	0	Provision for individual differences
4	4.27	0	Personal and interpersonal relationships with children
5	4.16	0	Ability to plan well in advance for lessons
6.5	4.05	0	Ability to apply basic principles of learning
6.5	4.05	0	Use of motivation in lessons presented
8	4.02	0	Skill in questioning and discussion
9.5	3.95	0	Daily and long range planning ability
9.5	3.95	1	Interest in teaching as a profession

TABLE III Continued

Mean	Mean Score*	(Tally) Not Used in the Recruitment Process	The Student Teacher/ Intern's:
11	3.94	0	Organization of lessons
12	3.93	0	Loyalty to co-workers, school, and profession
13.5	3.91	0	Oral communication skills
13.5	3.91	2	Provision for active student participation in lessons
15.5	3.86	1	Ability to state purpose of lessons
15.5	3.86	3	Commitment to arriving at and leaving school on time
17	3.84	0	Knowledge of subject matter
18	3.81	4	Ability to use student performance in determining lesson effectiveness
19	3.76	0	Desire to grow professionally
20	3.72	0	Creativity
21	3.67	1	Attitude toward school administration
22	3.63	0	Use of instructional materials
23	3.58	5	Pacing in lessons
24	3.48	0	Use of audio-visual aids
25	3.42	2	Ability to involve children in lesson planning and evaluation
26	3.40	3	Lesson summaries and conclusions

TABLE III Continued

Mean	Mean Score*	(Tally) Not Used in the Recruitment Process	The Student Teacher/ Intern's:
27	3.27	3	Career goals
28	2.97	1	Use of the chalkboard
29	2.78	7	Handwriting skill

*Maximum mean score possible is 5.00.

RESULTS OF COMPONENT II

This part of the questionnaire included two open-ended questions that solicited written responses from participants. The first of these requested suggestions for improving the chances of employment for inexperienced teacher candidates. Considering that some 76 specific suggestions were given, only a sample of the actual responses are listed in Table IV.

TABLE IV

A Sample of Suggestions by Public School Administrators to Inexperienced Teacher Candidates for Improving Chances of Employment

1. "Willingness to give extra time to students and school."
2. "Be willing to locate anywhere in Wisconsin."
3. "Find out about the school beforehand. Long hair doesn't go over too well in a small community."
4. "Learn how to write or type a letter of application."
5. "Not to have all the answers - maybe sometimes to say 'I don't know' rather than give a big explanation when it is obvious they don't really have an answer."

TABLE IV Continued

6. "Have a background in individualized instruction. Put in a year as a teacher's aide."

7. "Student teaching experience recommendation is really our basic determining factor."

8. "Average intelligence needed - but what the school man is looking for today is someone who can handle discipline."

9. "Be a little more humble. Stop writing letters demanding interviews, application forms, etc."

10. "Ask questions about curriculum, textbooks, discipline, and school board, before salary and benefits."

11. "Vacancies should not be open to everyone - too many disappointments. Colleges should have working relationships with schools. Should recommend one candidate to a school for a position - knowing the candidate and the school's expectations. There often should be a 5th year to qualify for a particular teaching position, say in reading, etc. Teacher prep colleges need to do more here than anywhere. Present college credentials are of little help. Much more emphasis is given to a one hour interview - which is a shame!!"

12. "Respond to questions with your own convictions, not those you think we want to hear."

13. "Request feedback (immediate) from interviewer before leaving. Also gain as much interviewing experience as possible."

14. "Be prepared to discuss an assignment somewhat different from the one that you applied for. (For example, if you were applying for a kindergarten job, how would you feel about a 3rd grade position.)"

15. "Thinking of the student teaching/intern experience as the beginning of a career rather than the culmination of being a student."

16. "Be aware of the latest developments in your field."

17. "Have them present themselves with a vita sheet or personal prospectus."

18. "Just be natural--if you got it, you will sell it!!!"

19. "Broad certification with concentration in two major areas. Primary teachers generally have too little background in reading and math."

Although only one suggestion concerning classroom control was mentioned in the sample presented in Table IV, a total of 4 such comments were included in the original list of 76. The issue of classroom control also ranked second among the professional characteristics included in Table III. Being able to maintain classroom control is obviously important to these public school administrators although one can only speculate whether or not they would agree on acceptable approaches for doing so.

Another topic that was mentioned several times in the original list was the need on the part of inexperienced teacher candidates to be able to write appropriate application letters. It would appear that college and university staff involved in teacher preparation would do well to review this issue as it applies to their particular program.

The second open-ended query requested at least two questions typically asked by administrators in interviews with inexperienced elementary school teacher candidates. Again, only a sample of the original list of 86 statements are included in Table V.

TABLE V

A Sample of Interview Questions Typically Asked of Inexperienced Elementary School Teacher Candidates

1. "Why do you want to teach?"
2. "How many reading courses have you completed?"
3. "What is your position relative to failing students? How do you justify this position?"
4. "What have you personally failed at and how did you feel about it?"

TABLE V Continued

5.	"Questions about background and home."
6.	"What was most rewarding in your student teaching experience?"
7.	"What experiences and/or training (coursework) have you had in Individually Guided Education?"
8.	"What things about your co-workers bugs you the most?"
9.	"What was the most difficult problem you encountered in your student teacher/intern experience?"
10.	"What is the most important qualification an elementary teacher should have?"
11.	"What do you desire your students to possess when they leave your class?"
12.	"Describe a school as you define it in ideal terms."
13.	"Can you handle your own music, art, and physical education?"
14.	"How do you individualize instruction?"
15.	"What is the main purpose in which elementary schools exist?"
16.	"Why have you chosen to stay with teaching when there is such a surplus?"
17.	"What are your interests outside of school?"
18.	"In what specific manner was your ability to control a class tested during student teaching?"
19.	"What would you like to know about us?"
20.	"What are the major problems in education as you see them?"
21.	"Why did you choose U. W. Eau Claire?"
22.	"Would you take an active part in the community?"
23.	"How important do you think daily lesson plans are?"
24.	"Devleop a brief prescription for a student having difficulty with . . . . . (hypothetical situation)."

COMPONENT III

The last question focused on the topic of the relative desirability of hiring inexperienced elementary teacher candidates who were interns as opposed to those who were student teachers. The results presented in Table VI indicate that 54.3% of the administrators selected the intern option, 4.3% opted for the student teacher, while 41.4% chose the "makes no difference" selection.

TABLE VI

Responses to the Question: All else being equal (total time in student teaching/internship, subjects taught, type of school, etc.) would you rather hire an inexperienced elementary teacher candidate who was (1) an intern, (2) a student teacher, or (3) it wouldn't make any difference? *

	Intern	Student Teacher	Makes No Difference	Total
Number of Administrators	63	5	48	116
Percent	54.3%	4.3%	41.4%	100%

*In all teacher preparation programs in Wisconsin, the elementary education internship is a one semester experience during the senior year.

This evidence suggests that these public school administrators either (1) prefer hiring an inexperienced elementary teacher candidate who served as an intern during the field experience component of the teacher education program or (2) showed no preference for the student teachers or interns. While this conclusion does not appear to support any particular choice, the fact that the "student teacher" option received only 4.3% of the choices

while the "intern" elective polled 54.3% implies a tendency to prefer interns. The reason for this partiality for interns might be attributed to a popular opinion which contends that the educational internship in many Wisconsin teacher preparation institutions is more like an authentic teaching position than the student teaching experience. Interns, for example, are licensed by the State Department of Instruction while student teachers are not. Interns are also the only one of the two who are paid a salary. In addition, interns are generally given more responsibility and more intense teaching loads during the field experience. It is, therefore, conceivable that the internship is viewed as being more "teacher like" by these 63 administrators. As such, these staff members are probably more confident that interns are better prepared in the more practical aspects of teacher preparation.

The fact that the "makes no difference" option received a substantial percentage of the tallies (41.4%) deserves additional attention. In the opinion of these 48 administrators, the title of the undergraduate field experience participant, in itself, is obviously not important. Possibly, these individuals view the overall quality of the student teaching/internship as the most important consideration, regardless of the term used to address the individual engaged in the field experience.

SUMMARY

1) The most important element of the pre-service teacher's placement file was the letter of reference written for interns and student teachers by the cooperating teacher.

2) Of various personal characteristics that could be included in the letters of reference for interns and student teachers, the following five were ranked highest (mean scores are included in parentheses; the maximum mean score possible is 5.00):

The student teacher/intern's:

a) Enthusiasm (4.48)

b) Ability to benefit from constructive advice from supervisors (4.45)

c) Dependability (4.44)

d) Cooperative attitude (4.32)

e) Desire to work hard (4.29)

3) Of various professional characteristics that could be included in the letters of reference for interns and student teachers, the following were ranked as the top 5 (mean scores are included in parentheses; the maximum mean score possible is 5.00):

The student teacher/intern's:

a) Understanding of children and their basic needs (4.50)

b) Ability to maintain classroom control (4.49)

c) Provision for individual differences (4.35)

d) Personal and interpersonal relationships with children (4.27)

e) Ability to plan well in advance for lessons (4.16)

4) Pre-service teachers who were involved in an internship were considered more desirable elementary school teacher candidates by 54.3% of these Wisconsin administrators. However, a substantial proportion of respondents (41.4%) indicated that neither interns nor student teachers would automatically be regarded as a more preferable applicant.

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